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ABSTRACT

Researchers have long noted the psychologically-liberating effects of expressive language. This paper explores how a writing technique, scribliotherapy, enhances communication among students, parents, and teachers. Scribliography is the technique of matching children with books on the topics of their emotional concerns and writing their response to experiences. The paper describes the technique's theoretical underpinnings, technical procedures, an example of one student-parent-teacher interaction from a pilot study, and a statement of the significance of beginning this type of endeavor. Previous research has shown that writing enhanced students' awareness by helping individuals organize their inner selves, by promoting personal integration, and by providing a catharsis for unexpressed emotions. A pilot study of scribliotherapy was conducted in a class of mostly Hispanic sixth graders. The students answered questionnaires and then wrote futuristic biographies in which they expressed their goals and described what they felt contributed to their accomplishment of these goals. The pilot led the researcher, teacher, and parents to express their concerns and generated suggestions for actions. Most parents had not considered the school as a source of support but the parents indicated a willingness to accept guidance from teachers and other school personnel. Initiating scribliotherapy can help teachers, parents, and students by opening their minds to communication and decision-making. (RJM)

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Scribliotherapy: Enhancing Communication Among Students, Parents, and Teachers

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Scribliotherapy: Enhancing Communication Among Students, Parents, and Teachers

Scribliotherapy, an instructional strategy for enhancing communication among students, parents, and teachers, adds the dimension of parent involvement to using writing as a therapeutic tool. The triangulation of discourse about a student's concerns, bringing together the student's expressed thoughts, the teacher's knowledge of students, and the parent's knowledge of his or her own child increases the possibilities for supporting students. I will describe the theoretical underpinnings, the procedures, an example of one student-parent-teacher interaction from a pilot study, and a statement of the significance of beginning this type of endeavor.

Theoretical Framework

Since the Progressive movement in the 1930's with the recognition of children's natural ability to express themselves, teachers have extolled the psychological value of creative writing. This belief lead to the use of creative writing and bibliotherapy, a technique of matching children with books on the topics of their emotional concerns, during World War II. Later, during the 60's when affective education became as important as traditional education, the curriculum expanded to include writing as an important response to experiences. Researchers noted the psychologically-liberating effects of expressive language and began to view writing as an informal therapeutic tool with children of all ages and in many different settings (Brand, 1987). Barritt and Kroll

(1978), suggest that the manipulation of ideas in writing is as important to self-understanding as manipulation of objects is in infancy (Barritt and Kroll, 1978, in Ganz, 1983). As such, the product is not as important as the process of creating the work (Creadick, 1985). From within a psychoanalytic framework, expressive writing becomes a very social act in which the author presents a picture of how or what he or she feels, knows, and wants in culturally appropriate ways (Litowitz and Gundlach, 1987).

Several researchers (Brand, 1987; Miller and Dingman, 1987; Litowitz and Gundlach, 1987) have used writing in guidance and clinical settings to investigate the therapeutic benefits. The students' work revealed that writing enhances awareness by (a) helping the individual organize their inner self, (b) contributing to personal integration, and (c) providing for cathartic emotional release (Brand, 1980 in Brand, 1987).

Advocates of the use of the developmental writing process in school settings also endorse writing for self-expression. Lucy Calkins (1986) and Nancy Atwell (1987) recommend that teachers allow their students to write on topics of their choice. When writing is personal, topics of choice are often emotionally-charged because these are the thoughts that preoccupy students. Teachers who are "psychologically alert," but may not have degrees in counseling (Brand, 1980), can use student's writing samples to enhance communication among the student, parents, themselves and other appropriate professionals, if needed. Thus, scribliotherapy, an instructional strategy, uses students' writing to involve parents in discovering, discussing, and dispelling student's problems.

How many people have experienced the power of writing to express emotions by

either themselves or others? As a teacher, professor, and researcher, I have gained insight into my own feelings and my students' and have been instrumental in supporting others with their concerns in response to their writing. In conferences with them and with parents, I realized how powerful a medium students' writing is for opening discourse. My experiences ranged from a young student who explored her fear of haircuts to another who felt deceived when she found out her mother had given a child up for adoption without her family's knowledge. Observing these cathartic experiences provided the catalyst to begin to explore using students' writing to communicate among students, parents, and teachers.

Methods and Techniques

A pilot study in a South Florida school included one class of 25 sixth graders, mostly Hispanic, who wrote using the developmental writing process. Parents gave written consent for their children to participate in the project. First, the students answered questionnaires that were adapted from Debra Jacobson in "The Evaluation Process, in Process" in The Whole Language Evaluation Book by Goodman, Goodman, and Hood 1989, p. 177-188. (See Appendix A.) The purpose of the questionnaire was to have some directly-stated, self-reported information about the student's attitudes toward reading to share with parents as an opener during the interview. I categorized these replies to give specific feedback to parents on the child's attitude, interest, home influence, self-concept, and strategies used. The students wrote essays using the developmental writing process which were later sent to the National Council of Teachers

of English for a writing contest. In the essays, futuristic biographies, students wrote about their goals as if they had already achieved them, describing what they felt contributed to their accomplishment of these goals. They wrote after listening to The Art Lesson by Tomie dePaola, an autobiographical picture book about a boy who always knew he wanted to become an artist, and did. Students could choose any career they wished and could write about any event they felt might influence their choice. They knew they were writing for a contest and that their parents would be reading and discussing their writing with me. When the essays were completed, I interviewed parents at the school. I began with information from the student's self-reported questionnaire and continued by asking questions focused on parents' responses to the writing. This originally-developed, parent questionnaire asked them to respond in the following way:

- Give a general response
- Identify the theme
- Indicate the intensity of the feeling expressed
- Evaluate if the theme seemed consistent with the child's goals at this time
- Interpret meaning of the content, if there were any special message
- Indicate if they could talk to their child
- Relate if their child talks openly with them or other adults in the family
- Tell where they might seek help if they felt it were needed
- Think of actions they could take at this time to help their child. (See Appendix B.)

The responses were recorded by hand, exactly what the parent said. This took more time than tape recording responses, giving wait time for thinking and elaboration by parents as well as giving them the feeling that their comments were valued. The responses were qualitatively analyzed. Reactions were varied, and indicated that insights into the student's personality were being shared. One parent commented, " This is my child, so I see much more than a teacher could by reading this." She was aware of the knowledge of her child as a total person that she brought to her reading of the essay.

The following example of another student's writing demonstrates how a parent focuses on significant information and can elaborate on a situation even when it is only briefly mentioned. Chris's three-page essay mentions sports only in the last paragraph.

> I love sports specially soccer and basketball. I played soccer in some teams and leagues like AYSO, K-land, West Kendall, and YMCA. I won fourteen trophies and seven medals in my short soccer career.

After reading the sample, Chris's mother responded to his writing by answering the following questions:

1. What is your first response?
   Soccer is his life. We pulled him out of soccer. After my father died he got into a depression. At that moment, he didn't want to play again. Now he's asking me. That was two years ago. Daddy was the one who used to support him. He used to go to all his games. He had my father, his father, he really enjoyed it. He still sleeps with his grandfather's picture. It's been a great loss for him. We went to the cemetery. He said it was beautiful. "Why didn't we bring Abulito to see this before?"
2. What do you see as the most important theme or idea?
   He would like to play again. He needs those things.
3. Is this consistent with what you know of your child?
   Yes. His greatest time was his soccer experience. He was missing him on

the field. His life was completely changed. He didn't have incentive . He stopped being the player he was. He felt terrible. It was his decision to leave the team.

4. How would you rate the intensity of feeling on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the mildest and 5 being the most intense?
   He didn't write with the passion that he talks. (No number given.)
5. Can you read meaning into the piece to get any special message?
   He wants to play again. His fear is death. He dreams when he dies he'll be able to see him. He's not fearful. He'll join my dad.
6. Are there feelings expressed that give you concern?
   He was always a winner and he's not anymore.
7. If yes to 6, what could you do about this situation?
   Talk, talk, talk to him. Get his self-esteem up.
8. Do you feel you and your child talk openly to each other?
   Yes.
9. Is there another adult in the family with whom you child talks?
   He talks to his father more often. My husband is very strong.
10. Where would you try to get help for your child if you felt it were needed?
    My mom. He listens to her. In a sweet way I think he could express himself more. She gets to him.
11. Is there any action you might be able to take now?
    I have to put him in a team. He loves sports. We used to have more time. I' m a full-time employee. Daddy is not here anymore!

I commented that I appreciated how much she missed her father and that closeness in families is beautiful. Then, I suggested that she try to find a car-pool with the other members of the team as a possible solution to the problem of not having someone who has the time to take Chris to the games.

The death of Chris's grandfather left the family, especially the boy and his mother, still grieving and unable to solve the immediate problem. By responding to Chris's writing, the mother was able to see that her son felt his soccer career was "short" and that he was ready to start playing again. With the simple suggestion of a car-pool, the logistics could begin to be worked out. In the year since the interview, the boy has played soccer again, starring on the school's new team. His grades have greatly

improved.

Results

The results of this pilot study suggest the potential of scribliotherapy, using writing to expand communication between students, parents, and teachers. The researcher, teacher, and parents discussed expressed concerns, perceived resources for support, and suggestions for actions. The sample from the pilot study showed that most parents had not considered the school as a source of support. The majority considered asking family members for help first, followed by a doctor or other professional counselor including clergymen. However, parents indicated a willingness to have guidance from teachers and other school personnel.

Educational Importance of the Study

Beginning the practice of scribliotherapy will help teachers and parents help students . If writing is to be meaningful, the audience must react to the content responsibly and collaboratively, demonstrating interconnectiveness. The pressures in society demand a response from as many public institutions as possible. When so many families suffer from emotional and economic pressures and more and more children witness or are subjected to violence of varying degrees, the need for professional help is increasing exponentially. Educators must recognize their potential role in helping children and parents cope within their social context. The use of scribliotherapy leads to the formation of partnerships with the family for the benefit of children. Teachers, students, and parents should look to each other as resources, sources of information and

guidance for creative problem-solving. Scribliotherapy opens minds to communication and decision-making for all those involved.

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APPENDIX A

Name_____Age____Grade_____Teacher_____

Reading Questionnaire*

1. Do you like to read?_____ Why? _____

_____

2. What kinds of books do you like to read or listen to?

_____

3. What do you do when you are reading and you come to something you don't know?_____

_____

4. So you think reading is important?_____ Why? _____

_____

5. Do you go to another library besides the school library? _____

Which one?_____ How often?_____

With whom?_____ Do you have a card with your name on it?_____

6. Is reading hard or easy for you?_____ Why?_____

_____

7. What's your favorite subject in school?_____

Why?_____

8. What do you like to do in your spare time? _____

_____

9. Are you a good reader? _____ Why?_____

_____

10. Are you a good writer? _____ Why?_____

_____

11. What languages do you (or your parents) speak at home?_____

12. Is your family a reading family?_____

_____

13. Is there a time and a place for you to read and write at home?

_____

* Adapted from D. Jacobson, "The Evaluation Process, in Process" in The Whole Language Evaluation book, edited by Goodman, Goodman and Hood (Heinemann, 1989) p.177-188.

Reading Questionnaire Analysis Form

Name _____ Date _____

Q#	Reported	Observed	Instructional Plans
1 4	Attitude:		
2 7 8	Interest:		
5 11 12 13	Home influence:		
6 9 10	Self-concept:		
3	Strategies:		

APPENDIX B

Student's Name _____ Parent's Name _____

SCRIBLIOTHERAPY PARENT INTERVIEW

People write from experience using the knowledge and ideas they have. They tell others what they are thinking, and, indirectly, much information about who they are. For this reason, sharing your child's writing can be way to gain insight into what your child is thinking and feeling. The reason for this interview is to promote communication between you and your child. I'll be taking notes about what is said so that I can study them afterwards.

Please read over your child's sample writing.

1. **What is your first response to the writing?**

2. **What do you see as the most important theme or idea?**

3. **Is this consistent with what you know of your child? Why?**

4. **How would you rate the intensity of feeling on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the mildest and 5 being the most intense?**
   mild intense
   1 . . . . . 2 . . . . . 3 . . . . . 4 5
5. **Can you read meaning into the piece to get any special message?**

6. **Are there any feelings expressed that give you concern?**

7. **If yes to 6, what could you do about this situation?**

8. **Do you feel you and your child talk openly to each other?**

9. **Is there another adult in the family with whom your child talks?**

10. **Where would you try to get help for your child if you felt it were needed?**

11. **Is there any action you might be able to take now?**